

## Editors' Introduction: Abolition Now

by Robert F. Carley, Stefanie A. Jones, Eero Laine and Chris Alen Sula

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**ABSTRACT** Cultural studies continues to develop its schools of thought, methodologies, and disciplines that are abolitionist. The articles in this issue encounter cultural studies across a range of sites: India, Spain, China, the US, and other geographies. It points toward the importance of cultural studies in a variety of contexts, the ways that cultural studies stands as both an intense form of critique and the political possibilities for its enactment as a program of work.

**KEYWORDS** abolition, cultural studies

It's difficult to write this introduction during the Covid-19 pandemic. As editors we are all situated in the US, and from our vantage, so much has shifted and so much has remained devastatingly the same. In many ways, the crises precipitated by the pandemic have revealed the political perversions of the United States's cross-class alliances in the defense of racial capitalism. These crises are the really-lived conditions of racial capitalism brought to light: the conditions of differentially-distributed life and death born out of an elite, multi-faceted politicization of racial categories, alongside the sustained neoliberal assault on organized labor and the persistent undermining of class consciousness. It is not actually surprising that Trump's grip over his base combined with astroturfed conservative activism led to a "liberation" movement in many states where people insisted on the right to work and consume, elevating "capitalist realism" from an ideological pathology infecting the imagination to actual pathology exacerbating the pandemic. A joke circulating in pop culture is deeply resonant, identifying the pandemic's four new classes as: billionaire, Zoom worker, essential worker, and unemployed. Whether through the threat of unemployment that holds "front-line" and "essential" workers hostage, or through the threat of being demoted to essential worker (and thus, risking exposure) that looms behind the massive speed-ups demanded of the remote working class, the brutal premise at the core of capitalism has been laid bare: give your life in sacrifice to the economic status quo.

Of course, for the majority of workers, racial capitalism's brutality has already been murderously evident, as the people's uprisings in response to the murder of George Floyd are but one powerful chorus in a long, drawn-out scream against the disposability of workers' lives. One searches for lessons from the conjuncture leading into neoliberalism: Herbert Marcuse's identification of subaltern groups with the Great Refusals emerging in and around civil rights struggles in the United States; Harry Braverman's accounts of the revolutionary ferments, in the US and across the twentieth century, against the automation of labor; Mario Tronti and Antonio Negri's writing about the refusal of work as a strategy for the factory floor born, in part, out of the work of the Johnson Forest Tendency which became the Chicago-based News and Letters Committee; Alfred Sohn-Rethel's accounts of the coordinated and strategic slow-downs as counter-norms to systems of production

norms and standards designed to speed human labor power into a machine-like frenzy of activity. While we can learn from the past, we also need new action for the present. Disability justice movements, always already anti-capitalist movements that attend to the body, offer us ideological shifts from political organizing and/as lived experience:

“No body is disposable.”<sup>1</sup>

“What our bodies, my mother’s and yours and mine, require in order to thrive, is what the world requires.”<sup>2</sup>

“Where life is precious, life is precious.”<sup>3</sup>

Yet rather than refuse work<sup>4</sup> the insistence on it (the identification of work with life itself, and/or the identification of work for those in service industries as worth more than life itself) by much of Trump’s base and the vast middle ground taking a casual or antagonistic approach to public safety gives rise to strange biopolitical meshes, twisting *homo faber* into a ghoulishly unrecognizable category with murderous urgency. We cannot wait for neoliberalism to stare itself down in the mirror and recognize that it has produced an underfunded and ineffective state, that its institutions depend on an always-already hierarchical and ineffectual market, that its infectious consumption of goods and services is concomitant with the spread of infection. No more time for navel-gazing compromise with capitalism. Abolition is, has long been, the necessary alternative. Abolition now.

And so the people’s uprisings continue to demand, even as we go to publication. Here’s to cultural studies continuing to develop its schools of thought, methodologies, and disciplines that are abolitionist. The articles in this issue encounter cultural studies across a range of sites: India, Spain, China, the US, and other geographies. It points toward the importance of cultural studies in a variety of contexts, the ways that cultural studies stands as both an intense form of critique and the political possibilities for its enactment as a program of work.

Swapna Gopinath’s “Manifestations of Microfascism in Spatial Dimensions: A Study on Mumbai’s Public Spaces < <https://csalateral.org/issue/9-1/manifestations-microfascism-spatial-dimensions-mumbai-public-spaces-gopinath/>> ” examines urban India under neoliberalism and the repressive features of city life that are embedded into everyday life. Mumbai serves as a particularly rich site for the examination of Deleuze and Guattari’s notion of microfascism and the development of control societies. Gopinath’s analysis develops through attention to public space and private desire and opens toward the possibilities for resistance and subversion, asking us to consider Mumbai as a case study for larger theoretical and political concerns.

In “Muslim Voices, Moorish Masks: Theoretical Perspectives on Music and Islam in Southern Spain < <https://csalateral.org/issue/9-1/muslim-voices-moorish-masks-music-islam-southern-spain-oberlander/>> n < <https://csalateral.org/wp/wp-admin/post.php?post=6523&action=edit>>,” Brian Oberlander interrogates how a “Moorish legacy” (a construction that refers to the diverse people, practices, and political formations of medieval Iberia that coincided with eight centuries of Islam) evoked through musical performance can be understood as fracturing and disrupting present-day Andalusian civic discourse, even as it seems to contribute to its reproduction through musical performances and heritage festivals. Oberlander reads Bhabha’s interpretation of Fanon into the theoretical debates around the concept of hybridity in both postcolonial theory

and studies of music. Oberlander argues that that an agile, situational application of the concept to Muslim musical performance in Andalusia enables us to trace the supple ethnographic contours and the diffuse political consequences of cultural difference as performed, experienced, and exploited in the field. By focusing on musical performances, Oberlander's work theorizes the effects of Islam in Andalusian civic discourse contributing to a larger dialogue in Hispanic studies and Spanish cultural studies about how, where, and in what way evocations of the past are experienced in the present.

*Lateral* is also pleased to publish "[Political Power and the Industrial Development of Cultural Artifacts in China](https://csalateral.org/issue/9-1/political-power-industrial-development-cultural-artifacts-china-liu/) < <https://csalateral.org/issue/9-1/political-power-industrial-development-cultural-artifacts-china-liu/>>," the 2019 Randy Martin winning essay, authored by Chang Liu. The article examines the production of cultural products in two provinces in China, offering a financial and political analysis that develops a critical understanding of economic and cultural policy. Liu's work uncovers the productive logics in a particular sector of manufacturing that affords a view of the mechanisms that span the factory and cultural understandings of the materials they produce.

Kourtney Maison and Katelyn Brooks continue *Lateral's* [Years in Cultural Studies](https://csalateral.org/years/) < <https://csalateral.org/years/>> project, with "[Alliances from the Rubble: Cultural Studies in the Year 1990](https://csalateral.org/section/years-in-cultural-studies/1990-alliances-from-the-rubble-maison-brooks/) < <https://csalateral.org/section/years-in-cultural-studies/1990-alliances-from-the-rubble-maison-brooks/>> ." Maison and Brooks unpack a notable year of cultural studies work that marks a major transition, not only from one decade to the next, but also as a hinge between old and new forms of global politics. The article offers numerous entry points to further cultural studies, encouraging scholars and activists to consider the functions of cultural studies as an academic discipline and political practice.

This issue also features a special section on [US Gun Culture](https://csalateral.org/archive/forum/gun-culture/) < <https://csalateral.org/archive/forum/gun-culture/>> , edited by Lindsay Livingston and Alex Trimble Young. The forum features four meditations on US gun culture, including [Chad Kautzer](https://csalateral.org/forum/gun-culture/introduction-performance-racial-sovereignty-livingston-young/) < <https://csalateral.org/forum/gun-culture/introduction-performance-racial-sovereignty-livingston-young/>> 's essay on theories of the sovereign subject, [Caroline Light](https://csalateral.org/forum/gun-culture/introduction-performance-racial-sovereignty-livingston-young/) < <https://csalateral.org/forum/gun-culture/introduction-performance-racial-sovereignty-livingston-young/>> 's work on the NRA and commodity fetishism, [Alex Trimble Young](https://csalateral.org/forum/gun-culture/introduction-performance-racial-sovereignty-livingston-young/) < <https://csalateral.org/forum/gun-culture/introduction-performance-racial-sovereignty-livingston-young/>> 's consideration of necropolitics and guns, and [Lindsay Livingston](https://csalateral.org/forum/gun-culture/introduction-performance-racial-sovereignty-livingston-young/) < <https://csalateral.org/forum/gun-culture/introduction-performance-racial-sovereignty-livingston-young/>> 's critique of the anti-black ideologies that underwrite much of the thinking around guns and gun rights in the US today. The forum is written through with contemporary and historical examples of the ways that gun culture has shaped the political landscape of the United States.

While *Lateral* has long been engaged in conversations oriented towards the deconstruction and destruction of capitalism, white supremacy, ableism, colonialism, and the cis-heteropatriarchy, this issue invites us to continue that work in many ways. Thinking through practices and patterns of violence, histories of cultural transformation, and rhetorical and infrastructural constructions of racial capitalist power and resistance around the world are also conversations linked to abolition. As always, we invite you to work with *Lateral* to continue to grow this project.

## Notes

1. Coined by Patty Berne of Sins Invalid, this slogan rejects the bodily impacts of ableism, racism, colonialism, fatphobia, capitalism, and the patriarchy. It was taken up again in 2019 by Max Airborne, Stacey Milbern, and Dawn Haney, as part of Fat Rose and Disability Justice Culture Club actions to close ICE detention centers. In 2020, it was part of a campaign against triage discrimination during the COVID-19 pandemic, and its use has grown from there. Max Airborne, personal email message to authors, June 26, 2020. [↗](#)
  2. Aurora Levins Morales, *Kindling: Writings on the Body* (Cambridge, MA: Palabrera Press, 2013): 10. [↗](#)
  3. Ruth Wilson Gilmore, "The Case for Prison Abolition: Ruth Wilson Gilmore on COVID-19, Racial Capitalism, and Decarceration," interview by Amy Goodman, *Democracy Now!* May 5, 2020, video, [https://www.democracynow.org/2020/5/5/ruth\\_wilson\\_gilmore\\_abolition\\_coronavirus](https://www.democracynow.org/2020/5/5/ruth_wilson_gilmore_abolition_coronavirus) <[https://www.democracynow.org/2020/5/5/ruth\\_wilson\\_gilmore\\_abolition\\_coronavirus](https://www.democracynow.org/2020/5/5/ruth_wilson_gilmore_abolition_coronavirus)> [↗](#)
  4. Kathi Weeks, *The Problem with Work: Feminism, Marxism, Antiwork Politics, and Postwork Imaginaries* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011) [↗](#)
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